

One Light, Many Windows

*A reflection on the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church's image of
'The Cathedral of the World'*

Isaiah 56:1-8 Acts 10:9-16
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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November 11, 2018

One of the real treasures here in the Tulsa area, yet perhaps a bit under-appreciated, is the strength of the relationships and alliances in and between our Interfaith communities of faith. For a recent example, the level of genuine compassion, participation, and understanding shared and experienced at the overflow Service of Remembrance at Congregation B'nai Emunah Synagogue just over a week ago in recognition, solidarity, and sorrow over the hate crime massacre at the Jewish Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. It was a wonderful showing of our Interfaith connections.

How many of you, of us, who grew up in the Christian tradition were taught that other faith traditions simply had it wrong? Many of us grew up hearing how everyone but Christians were going to Hell. It's easy to devalue the life of others who are just going to Hell anyway. I, for one, am so glad those exclusivist theological days are behind me. But it is my impression that a majority of Christians still believe that they, exclusively, have a handle on the nature and character of God.

Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, a noted author, editor, Jewish teacher, and the head of the Anti-Defamation League's New Jersey office, has spent his career working to create solutions to anti-Semitism, extending that to combat bigotry in general. As a victim of anti-Jewish bullying back in high school, he said that he recently returned for a class reunion where many of his classmates came up to him and actually apologized for the way they once treated him. The lesson he learned is that **"bigotry is a curable disease – not always, but often. Sometimes knowledge is an antidote and sometimes forming relationships is. Once you know someone, it is much harder to hate them."**

Those of us involved in Interfaith work here in Tulsa have indeed found that to be true as we engage in dialogue and relationship-building, especially between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. That was a major focus of the Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry (TMM) sponsored trip to Israel and Palestine in September that I was fortunate to be a participant.

One of the most helpful and meaningful metaphors I've ever heard about the need to accept others different from ourselves is an image developed by the **Rev. Dr. Forrest Church**. It's called, **'The Cathedral of the World.'** I first heard it six years ago while attending a lecture at Temple Israel. Some of you may remember it from a sermon I shared soon thereafter. Born in 1948, the Rev. Dr. Forrest Church served for almost three decades as senior minister at All Souls Unitarian Church of Manhattan in New York City. He passed away in 2009. A primary focus of his ministry can perhaps best be summarized as **a call to respect and even embrace otherness, rather than merely to tolerate or, even worse, dismiss it.**

Rev. Church introduced the image of 'The Cathedral of the World' in a 2001 essay. [*Universalism: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century*; UU World, November/December 2001.] It can be summarized this way: **In the Cathedral of the World each religious tribe stands under their own window. Therefore, each window refracts the light that shines through differently. It is the same light, however, that shines through each window. In other words, there is one light, but many windows.** Forrest Church's complete essay, was printed in his final book, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Beacon Press, 2009). So profound is this image of Interfaith understanding, let alone a way to understand differences within Christianity itself, and I would add differences of any kind between people, I want to share a portion of his essay with you this morning, in his words. I invite you to open your imagination.

The Cathedral of the World

A twenty-first-century theology, based on the concept of one light and many windows.

By Rev. Dr. Forrest Church

UU Winter 2009 11.1.09

Imagine awakening one morning from a deep and dreamless sleep to find yourself in the nave of a vast cathedral... Awakening to the call stirring deep within you, the call of life itself—the call of God—you begin your pilgrimage.

Before you do, look about you. Contemplate the mystery and contemplate with awe. This cathedral is as ancient as humankind, its cornerstone the first altar, marked with the tincture of blood and blessed by tears. Search for a lifetime—which is all you are surely given—and you shall never know its limits, visit all its transepts, worship at its myriad shrines, nor span its celestial ceiling with your gaze. The builders have worked from time immemorial, destroying and creating, confounding and perfecting, tearing down and raising up arches in this cathedral, buttresses and chapels, organs, theaters and chancels, gargoyles, idols and icons. Not a moment passes without work being begun that shall not be finished in the lifetime of the architects who planned it, the patrons who paid for it, the builders who construct it, or the expectant worshipers. Throughout human history, one generation after another has labored lovingly, sometimes fearfully, crafting memorials and consecrating shrines. Untold numbers of these today collect dust in long undisturbed chambers; others (cast centuries or eons ago from their once respected places) lie shattered in shards or ground into dust on the cathedral floor. Not a moment passes without the dreams of long-dead dreamers being outstripped, crushed, or abandoned, giving way to new visions, each immortal in reach, ephemeral in grasp.

Welcome to the Cathedral of the World.

Above all else, contemplate the windows. In the Cathedral of the World there are windows beyond number, some long forgotten, covered with many patinas of dust, others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines. Each in its own way is beautiful. Some are abstract, others representational; some dark and meditative, others bright and dazzling. Each tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind,

the mystery of death. The windows of the cathedral are where the light shines through.

As with all extended metaphors for meaning, this one is imperfect. The Light of God (or Truth or Being Itself, call it what you will) shines not only upon us, but out from within us as well. Together with the windows, we are part of the Cathedral, not apart from it. Together we comprise an interdependent web of being... Because the Cathedral is so vast, our life so short and our vision so dim, we are able to contemplate only a tiny part of the cathedral, explore a few apses, reflect upon the play of light and darkness through a few of its myriad windows. Yet, since the whole is contained in each of the parts, as we ponder and act on the insight from our ruminations, we may discover insights that will invest our days with meaning and our lives with purpose.

A twenty-first-century theology based on the concept of one Light and many windows offers to its adherents both breadth and focus. Honoring many different religious approaches, it only excludes the truth-claims of absolutists. That is because fundamentalists claim that the Light shines through their window only. Some go so far as to beseech their followers to throw stones through other people's windows.

Skeptics draw the opposite conclusion. Seeing the bewildering variety of windows and observing the folly of the worshipers, they conclude that there is no Light. But the windows are not the Light. They are where the Light shines through.

We shall never see the Light directly, only as refracted through the windows of the Cathedral. Prompting humility, life's mystery lies hidden, beyond knowledge's most ample ken [range of understanding and perception]. The Light (God, Truth) is veiled. Yet, that we can encompass with our minds the universe that encompasses us is a cause for great wonder. I humbly stand in the Cathedral of the World trembling with awe.

Some people have trouble believing in a God who looks into any eyes but theirs. Others have trouble believing in a God they cannot see. But that none of us can look directly into God's eyes certainly doesn't mean God isn't there, mysterious, unknowable, gazing into ours, gazing through the windows of the Cathedral of the World.

From the late Rev. Dr. Forrest Church's final book, [The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology](#) (Beacon Press, 2009). Church introduced this image in "[Universalism: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century](#)" (UU World, November/December 2001).

For those of you wondering what images our own scriptures have to say about the inclusiveness of God – dare I say the universalist nature of God – I invite you to take a close look at today's biblical readings. From the New Testament Book of Acts, chapter 10, we learn that Peter, in a dream, was told to get up and eat the unclean animals that came down in a sheet from heaven. Following his religious tradition, Peter said that he couldn't, and added he had never eaten anything that the law claimed was profane or unclean. The dream ended after the voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' **This should cause us to**

think of the countless things that Christianity declares profane and unclean in this day and age – whether it be certain people, behaviors, or beliefs – and wonder if we should not also hear the voice telling us, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ So, let me ask: Can or should this understanding be applied to religious traditions that differ from our own?

In the Old Testament prophecy from Isaiah 56, we learn about the time when even faithful eunuchs and foreigners will be allowed into God's house of prayer. It states, **“For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.”** I ask the same question: Can or should this be applied to religious traditions that differ from our own?

Speaking personally, it is my profound belief that **God will eventually draw all of creation unto God's self – regardless of the claims of exclusivity that are common in basically all faith traditions, certainly in Christianity.** It is this belief that can allow us to contemplate the profound implications of 'The Cathedral of the World,' where God is understood as Light shining through the varied windows, refracting that Light into different patterns and colors, and perceived by each of us in accordance to the window we stand beneath.

Many windows, yes. But only one Light!

Amen.